

Lowering the bowel screening starting age to 58

March 2025

At a Glance

The age at which people can start taking part in the free National Bowel Screening Programme is being lowered from 60 to 58 years of age. Currently, people can have free bowel screening from the age of 60 to 74. Lowering the age to 58 means that at least 122,000 more people will be eligible for screening over the first year.

Cabinet also approved a very significant investment in a range of initiatives to lift bowel screening participation rates, particularly focused on high-needs populations with low screening rates (Māori, Pacific Peoples and Asian populations).

These initiatives include introduction of bar-coded bowel screening kits, alternative drop-off options for the return of kits, a national promotion campaign, education and training of healthcare workers, and working with and supporting Hauora Māori, Pacific and primary care providers. There will also be improvements to the bowel screening register.

Bowel screening aims to save lives by helping find bowel cancer at an early stage when it can often be successfully treated. There may be no warning signs that someone has bowel cancer.

New Zealand has one of the highest rates of bowel cancer in the world – bowel cancer is our second highest cause of cancer death. More than 3300 people are diagnosed with bowel cancer every year and more than 1200 die from it.

Saving lives

- Modelling estimates that lowering the bowel screening starting age to 58 will prevent 771 additional bowel cancers and 566 additional deaths over 25 years, compared to the current 60 to 74 age range.
- There will also be significant investment in initiatives to lift bowel screening participation in groups with lower screening rates.

Timeframe and approach to the rollout

- Lowering the bowel screening starting age to 58 will take place in two stages. The first stage will begin in October 2025 in two Health New Zealand | Te Whatu Ora regions, and the second stage will begin in March 2026 in the remaining two regions. Which regions will go first is being confirmed.
- People turning 58, or who are already 58, don't need to do anything. They will be mailed their bowel screening kit around their next birthday or be contacted by a local health provider, once age extension is introduced in their area.
- People turning 60 will receive a kit around their birthday as part of the existing programme, whether or not the lower age range is available in their area yet.

Current pilots for Māori and Pacific Peoples

- Health NZ Tairāwhiti and MidCentral districts are offering bowel screening from the age of 50 for Māori and Pacific Peoples as part of a two-year learning pilot. They complete their pilots later in 2025. Waikato District completed its two-year pilot in December 2024.
- People who are part of those pilots will continue to be invited for bowel screening – provided they remain eligible and still live in that district – until they turn 58 and join the wider programme.

How bowel screening works

- The bowel screening test is quick, simple and can be done at home. The test can detect tiny traces of blood present in a small sample of bowel motion (poo) – which may be an early warning sign that something is wrong with the bowel.
- Data from the bowel screening programme shows that the bowel screening test will find at least 7 out of 10 cancers that are present.
- Bowel cancers do not bleed all the time, so sometimes a cancer can be missed. Bowel cancer may also start to develop between screening tests. For these reasons it's important to have bowel screening every two years and talk to your doctor straight away if you have any bowel cancer symptoms.
- Further investigation can also detect polyps (growths). These are not cancer but may develop into a cancer over a number of years. Most polyps can be easily removed, reducing the risk that bowel cancer will develop.
- A bowel screening kit is sent to people's home every two years from the age of 60 to 74 (now being lowered to a starting age of 58 years).
- Since the beginning of the programme in July 2017, more than 2.29 million home test kits have been sent out and over 2760 cancers have been detected (February 2025). At least a third of these cancers were detected at an early stage, when they can often be successfully treated.
- The current programme participation rate is 57.1% overall, 50.2% for Māori, 38% for Pacific Peoples and 43.6% for Asian populations (December 2024). The programme has a target of 60% participation.
- The National Bowel Screening Programme is for those who have no symptoms of bowel cancer. People with the following symptoms, or who are concerned about their bowel health, should see their doctor right away:
 - a change in your normal bowel habit that continues for several weeks
 - blood in your bowel motion (poo).

For more information

- More information about bowel screening is available on the [Time to Screen](#) website, by calling the National Bowel Screening Programme on 0800 924 432 or emailing on info@bowelscreening.health.nz, or talking to your doctor.
- Information about bowel screening for health professionals is available on the [Health NZ website](#).